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ABSTRACT

Implementing the least restrictive environment or full inclusion philosophy places new demands on public school personnel. In particular, principals must command an understanding of special education to implement procedural requirements effectively and to provide appropriate educational services for disabled students in their schools. However, research has shown that: (1) many principals lacked formal training in special education but were interested in receiving such training; (2) principals were reluctant to assume new responsibilities related to special education due to their lack of training; (3) only a third of the states required administrators to have a knowledge of special education law; and (4) over half of the school administration graduate programs surveyed had no special education requirements. A survey of 120 administrators enrolled in graduate programs at South Carolina State University (SCSU) found that the great majority had no formal training in special education, felt that an effective school leader needed such training, and would be interested in participating. A total of 21 administrator competencies in special education are listed in the categories of core competencies, assessment, and special problems or topics. SCSU has received a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to fund a 15-credit concentration in special education for administrators. The five courses in the concentration are briefly described. Contains 28 references. (SV)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION TRAINING FOR RURAL MINORITY SCHOOL LEADERS: A FUNDED PROPOSAL

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Introduction

In April, 1991 at the announcement of the national education strategy, AMERICA 2000, President Bush stated: "We are responsible for educating everyone among us, regardless of background or disability." This statement makes it clear that this reform package applies to all Americans and that states will be held accountable for adequately addressing the National Education Goals.

Implementing the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and/or the full inclusion philosophy (i.e., disabled students participate in regular classrooms) creates new needs and places new demands on public school personnel.

One significant issue in the call for reforms has been on the quality of training programs for principals and the teachers whom they supervise. Widespread agreement exists about the crucial role of principals (elementary, middle, and secondary) in producing effective schools. Focusing solely on principals and ignoring other critical factors such as teachers, textbooks, curriculum, school funding, and the leadership of superintendents, other members of the administrative team, and the school boards would be a mistake. However, it is the principal who sets the tone for the school and overseas the organization and implementation of an effective instructional program (Greenfield, 1987; Smith, 1989; Sergiovanni,1990 ; & Olivia, 1993).

In 1985, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education (OSEP) funded a series of grants for the purpose of investigating instruction plus organizational and administrative issues related to educating students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment. This unified system of delivery has come to be known as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). In order to accomplish a partnership between regular and special education, Madeline Will, in a U. S. Department of Education report titled, "Educating Students with Learning Problems: A shared Responsibility" (1986), made the following recommendation: "principals should be empowered to control all programs and resources at the building level." With Will's endorsement of this initiative, many experts in the field have become advocates of educating children and youth with disabilities in a single system (Wang, Reynolds, & Walbert, 1988; Lipsky & Gartner, 1988; Lilly, 1988; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1991; Loyld, Sing, & Repp, 1991). As this movement becomes adopted by school districts, principals must command an understanding of special education to implement procedural requirements effectively and to provide appropriate educational services for disabled students in their schools.

Even if the Regular Education Initiative does not fully become a reality, the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) concept will continue to be a major component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1990). LRE means that students with disabilities should

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be moved to self-contained special education classes only when the severity of their disabling condition is so great that the student" needs cannot be accommodated in the regular educational setting (Salend, 1990; Turnbull, 1991). Hence, principals need to be knowledgeable regardless of what reforms they are addressing.

Most principals, however, do not have the knowledge of the instructional and programmatic needs of disabled children. At the 70th annual convention of the Council for exceptional Children (Baltimore, 1991), Aspedon (1992) presented the results of a study titled "Principals' Attitudes Towards Special education: Results and Implications of a Comprehensive Research Study." Some significant findings were: (1) over 40% of principals had never had any special education course; (2) over 85% of principals felt that formal training in special education is needed in order to be a successful building principal; (3) over 80% of principals had moderate to very high interest in receiving special education training; and (4) despite lack of special education training, over 75% of principals had exclusive or shared responsibility for supervising and evaluating special education teachers in their schools. This study found striking similarities between its findings and the work of Davis (1989). This comparison indicated that little had been done in the ensuing years to assist building principals in assuming ownership for special education programs and students with disabilities. In addition, research has established that principals generally have negative attitudes about assuming additional responsibilities related to the educational needs of disabled children because they have not had the training necessary to develop effective programs (Olson, 1982; O'Neil, 1988; Hirth & Valesky, 1989; Weinstein, 1989). These studies with regular education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators indicated that the groups expressed the need for training in order to implement changes in classroom services legally mandated.

Valesky and Hirth (1992) surveyed state directors of special education to examine state requirements for certification endorsements of school administrators to determine whether they require a knowledge of special education law, specifically, and special education in general. This study found that only 33% of all regular administrator endorsements were required to have a knowledge of special education law and that no state requirement for a general knowledge of special education existed for 45% of the regular administrator endorsements.

In an earlier study, Hirth and Valesky (1991) surveyed colleges and universities in the United States offering graduate degrees in school administration to determine requirements for special education and special education law knowledge for administrative endorsements. This study found that only 27% of all regular administrator endorsements offered required knowledge of special education law and 57% of endorsements offered by the universities had no requirement for knowledge of special education.

A recent North Carolina Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) report (NCDI, 1991-1995), which presents current data available fro0m many sources (e.g., teacher certification, descriptions of trends in various disability areas) lists "limited administrator knowledge and support" as a barrier to effective service delivery. In addition, regard to inservice training opportunities, the report specifically states that administrators should be instructed inn the following areas related to students with disabilities: (a) personnel development and support; (b) behavior management; (c) development of reasonable expectations for disabled students and

programs; (d) legal issues relating to identification and placement; (e) legal issues relating to expulsion and out-of-school and in-school suspension; (f) systems for offering support for disabled children service providers; (g) placement decision-making skills; (h) competencies in the mainstreaming process and implementation; and (I) advocacy for disabled students' families. While these training areas were specifically listed under the behaviorally-emotionally disabled program, administrators should have these training opportunities for all areas of disabilities.

The South Carolina State University Department of Educational Administration (1993) conducted a survey at the building level to determine to what extent practitioners felt they already possessed knowledge necessary to effectively administer programs for students with disabilities and if they would be interested in training and/or a degree concentration in disabilities related supervision (e.g., behavior management, personnel evaluation). The sample was drawn from principals, assistant principals, and supervisors from South Carolina, southern North Carolina, and northern Georgia enrolled in the Ed. S and Ed. D. programs and graduate students at South Carolina State University. One hundred and twenty individuals responded to the survey.

Significant findings indicated: (a) 75% of the administrators had no formal training in special education; (b) that what they did know about special education came from memos sent to them from the administration office or state or through "making mistakes;" (c) over 90% of the administrators indicated that formal special education training was needed in order to be an effective school leader; and (d) 89% indicated that they would be interested in participating in a training program. The Survey questions and results is presented in Appendix A. A survey conducted at North Carolina Central University involving principals enrolled in classes at that institution as well as administrators in Durham County, Granville County, and Wake County indicated similar results. In another study (Langley, 1993) involving 103 secondary principals in South Carolina, 97% indicated that course work in administration of special education programs would be useful to extremely useful, and 95% felt that coursework in administration/ supervision of learning disabled programs would also be very beneficial in terms of performing their job duties. These studies clearly support the need to train school administrators in special education.

It is clear that principals need and want training in special education if the current trend of educating the majority of children with disabilities by implementing the full inclusion policy or LRE mandate continues. Thus administrator preparation institutions should design and implement administrator training programs that address the need for knowledge of special education.

As indicated earlier, principals and other administrators felt the need for additional special education training in both theory and practice. In view of this, the Department of Educational Administration developed a course of study (special education component/competencies) which focused on bridging the gap between theory and practical application. Therefore, each course had a field experience component, giving students the opportunity to immediately be involved with disabled students. Also, the sequence of courses culminated in an internship where participants have a more intensive experience.

Competencies in this special education component may arbitrarily be assigned to four areas: core, assessment, special problems/topics. And internship/practicum. These competencies identify specific knowledge and skills which would enable principals to more effectively perform job tasks related to special education. Following are examples of these competencies.

Core Competencies

1. Identifying disabled students
2. Being familiar with definitions of various disabling conditions
3. Being aware of current legislation related to individuals with disabilities
4. Understanding the historical influence of various legislation
5. Understanding the etiology incidence and prevalence figures of various disabling conditions
6. Understanding the educational needs of students with disabilities
7. Understanding the concept of least restrictive environment
8. Identifying effective classroom methods appropriate for varying handicapping conditions
9. Adapting and modifying curriculum materials
10. Using technology effectively
11. Understanding how to use assessment data to plan instructional programs

Assessment

12. Understanding basic considerations in psychological and educational assessment of students (including legal and ethical considerations
13. Applying assessment information to educational decision making (understanding how to write and evaluate IEPs)
14. Understanding the general referral and assessment process as well as how it relates to specific states
15. Acquiring Level I and Level II computer competency

Special Problems/Topics

16. Understanding current topics/problems in administration as they relate to special education (e.g., LRE—achieving full inclusion, mainstreaming, disciplining students with disabilities, advocacy, and legal issues)
17. Developing specific administrative knowledge/competencies essential to school administration with emphasis in special education.
18. Synthesizing theoretical knowledge and applied skills gained in the classroom setting.
19. Acquiring practical experience which leads to increasing competency with emphasis in special education.
20. Gaining experience in formative and summative staff evaluation in a special education setting.
21. Developing an analytical paper or doing a project related to some problem identified in relation to special education at the building or district level.

Special Education Courses

The following five courses address these administrative competencies necessary for principals to effectively supervise special education programs and personnel.

1. Introduction to Exceptional Children and Youth: This course would cover a general overview of exceptional children and youth. Major emphasis should

focus on critical issues such as current legislation , historical influence, definitions, incidence, prevalence figures, identification, etiology, educational adaptations and cultural diversity. Additionally, the course should provide participants an increased awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the educational needs of children and youth and the least restrictive environment. Students should spend a 10 hour field experience observing students with disabilities.

2. Educating Exceptional Children and Youth: This course would be an extension of the introductory course. Students would be exposed to specific methods and materials that could be used effectively in the classroom setting with the varying handicapping conditions. Emphasis would be on adapting and modifying curriculum materials, effectively using technology, and using assessment data to plan instructional programs. This course would include a 10-hour field experience of individual and small group instruction with students with disabilities.

3. Assessment in Special Education: This course describes basis considerations in psychological and educational assessment of students to include legal and ethical considerations is assessment. Basic measurements concepts and the most common domains in which assessment of abilities and in which assessment of skill attainment are conducted also discussed. Special consideration is given to applying assessment information to educational decision making. This course also addresses general referral and assessment processes as well as those that are state specific. The student also acquires Level I and Level II computer competencies. This field experience students-high school, middle school, and elementary school.

4. Special Topics in Educational Administration: A special topics seminar focuses on various topics/problems in administration as they relate to special education. Examples of topics include REI and/or Achieving Full Inclusion, Mainstreaming, Disciplining Students with Disabilities, Advocacy, and Legal Issues.

5. Internship in Educational Administration: This course provides a supervised internship in educational administration with an emphasis in special education. This experience should be as realistic as possible. It should ensure that principles enter the professional job market with the skills needed for survival and success in a culturally diverse setting. This internship also incorporates a variety of structured requirements and activities that collectively "bridge the gap" between methods and/or laboratory courses and actual independent professional administration.

These five courses were incorporated into a grant funded by the U. S. Department of Education for five years. Practicing certified administrators throughout North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia and Ed. S./Ed. D. students in the Department of Educational Administration at South Carolina State University are eligible to receive the grant. The grant funds a 15 student cohort for each of the 5 years.

Although more in-depth knowledge and training may provide optimal preparation to administer special education programs, the foregoing 15 credit hour concentration seems more realistic in terms of program requirements and students' needs/interests. Of greatest importance is that principals and other administrators have adequate knowledge and skills to administer all programs for which they are accountable.

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